



TAKIN' IT TO THE STREETS

GALLERIES AND COLLECTORS ARE RECOGNIZING THAT STREET ART HAS EVOLVED FAR BEYOND THE WRITING ON THE WALL

BY JAHMANE | PHOTOGRAPHY BY HELEN KLISSEK DURING



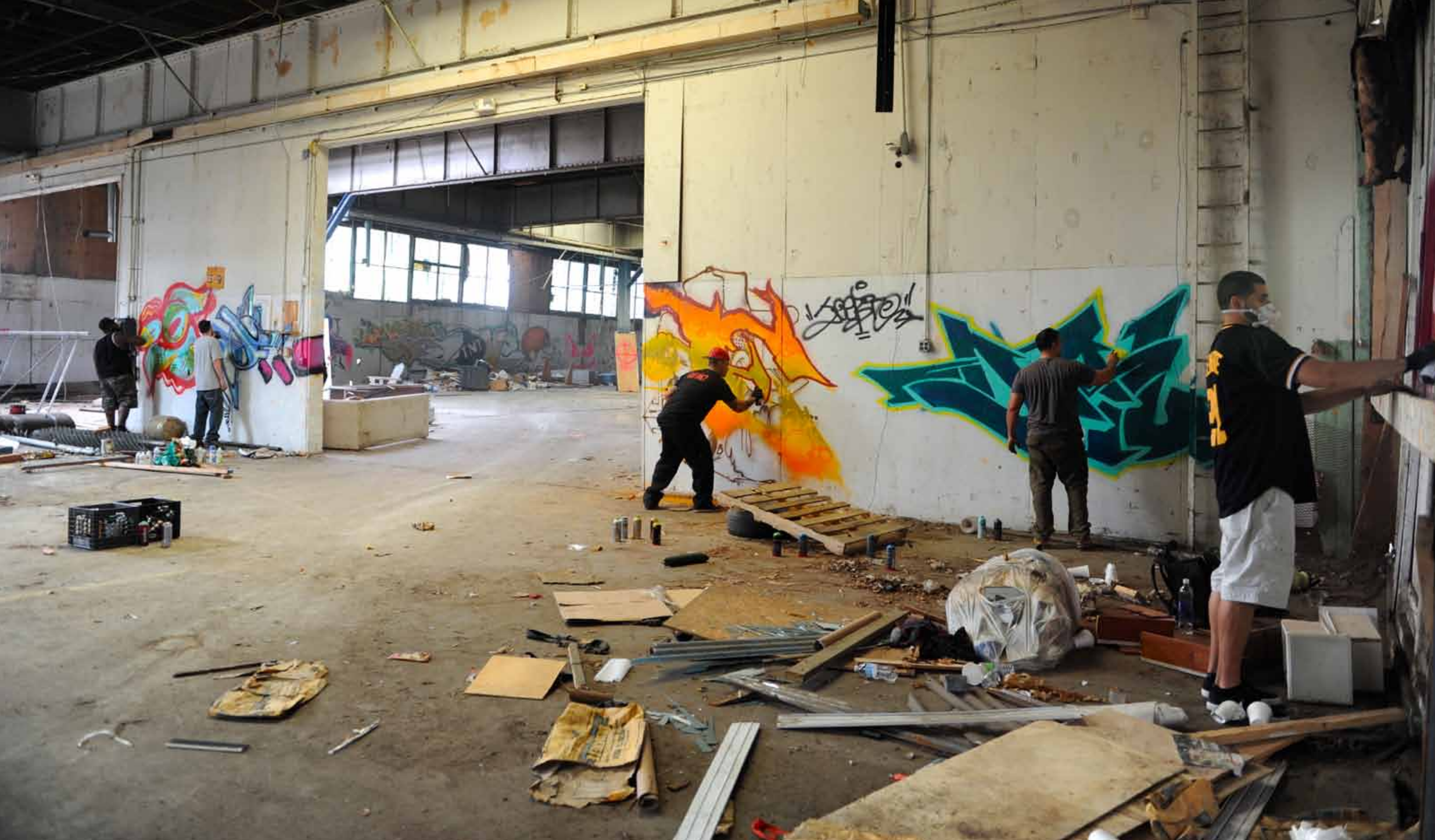
A global street-art phenomenon is taking the world by storm, but not by surprise. Decades before this multifaceted art form was so openly welcomed into museums, galleries and private collections, graffiti artists (or writers) were labeled outlaws for spray painting their tags on the trains, walls, tunnels and pages of history. Early graffiti pioneers like Stay High 149, Taki 183, Cornbread and Phase 2, supplied the blueprint for present-day street-art icons like Banksy, Shepard Fairey, Mr. Brainwash and a multitude of next-generation street artists to launch their own careers.

Although most major US cities lay claim to a particular style or contribution toward graffiti's evolution, the Bronx is universally recognized as the mecca and birthplace of graffiti culture, which along with BBoying (break dancing), MCing and DJing comprise the four major elements of a broader hip-hop culture. As the visual (art) component, graffiti has played an essential role in fusing underground with popular culture.



Street Artists (OPPOSITE TOP) Core members of the Die crew (Revenge, Pacer, Geli, ES, Jah, Drue) in front of a thematic resurrection of Bridgeport's Majestic Theater (Main Steet between Congress and Arch streets). **Big-Top Salute** (OPPOSITE BOTTOM) The Die crew was behind this tribute to circus visionary and Bridgeport resident P.T. Barnum (Main and Gold streets) supported by Mayor Bill Finch and the City of Bridgeport. **Batman Returns** Downtown Bridgeport art on Main Street (between Golden Hill and Arch streets) depicts a vintage Batman character by Jick and graffiti veteran Wane COD. **Create, Inspire** "Set The World on Fire" by legendary Tats Cru members Nicer and Bio.





Connecticut's proximity to New York has always granted its residents first dibs on trends and culture coming out of the big city. As graffiti culture expanded from the boroughs of New York, one of its first stops was Connecticut. Writers from Hartford to Norwalk caught on early and developed styles in tune with New York influences. The absence of subways led Connecticut writers to hone their skills in the tunnels and underpasses of Metro-North and freight train lines that cross the state. Abandoned factories of postindustrial urbanized cities like Bridgeport became hidden galleries where crews of writers could execute large-scale mural productions that eventually spilled over into the city's landscape. One such crew (the Die crew) has been painting as a collective for several years, with its core members ES, Drue, Pacer, Geli and Revenge producing some of Connecticut's most legendary pieces. In the past few years, the Die crew has been responsible for two of Bridgeport's landmark productions, a tribute to circus visionary and Bridgeport resident P.T. Barnum and a thematic resurrection of the historic Majestic Theater. Both projects received support from Mayor Bill Finch and the City of Bridgeport, as well as praise from an admiring public, ushering in what could be signs of new development and renewed hope for an otherwise desolate downtown Bridgeport.

In addition to their civic activities, the Die crew remains a well-respected pillar in the graffiti community. Acting as diplomats of sorts, they've hosted world-class writers like Cope2, Wane,



Personal Statements As part of the creative process, area street artists ES (OPPOSITE PAGE, FAR LEFT), Geli (OPPOSITE PAGE, NEAR LEFT), Jah (RIGHT) and Drue (TOP RIGHT) practice techniques that signify their unique styles at the Knowlton Artist Lofts in Bridgeport (ABOVE). The group works in silence drawing off the inspiration of painting as a crew. Historically, graffiti crews formed from groups of writers with general commonalities, but vastly different identities. The main goal of a crew is to build on each individual's talents, while increasing the overall fame of its members.





Ring Master (ABOVE LEFT) Geli in front of his “Mean Green” portion of the P.T. Barnum mural at Main and Gold streets. **Clock Work** (ABOVE RIGHT) Pacer in front of his piece inspired by the inner workings of disassembled clocks at Main and Gold streets. **Graffiti Theater** (BELOW) Drue in front of his vibrant 3D-style piece at the Majestic Theater on Main between Congress and Arch streets.



Admit One and All (ABOVE) ES welcomes all to view his piece on the Majestic Theater in Bridgeport. **Many Styles** (BELOW LEFT) Revenge in front of his “abstract, organic” style work, part of the P.T. Barnum mural. **Making a Statement** (BELOW RIGHT) Jah in front of his “Save Our Seedz” mural, a call to stop the violence and educate the youth, located at Main and Golden Hill streets.





Piece of History (LEFT) Jah holds a graffiti fragment created by some 20 years of layers of paint from the wall of Fame City in Bridgeport.

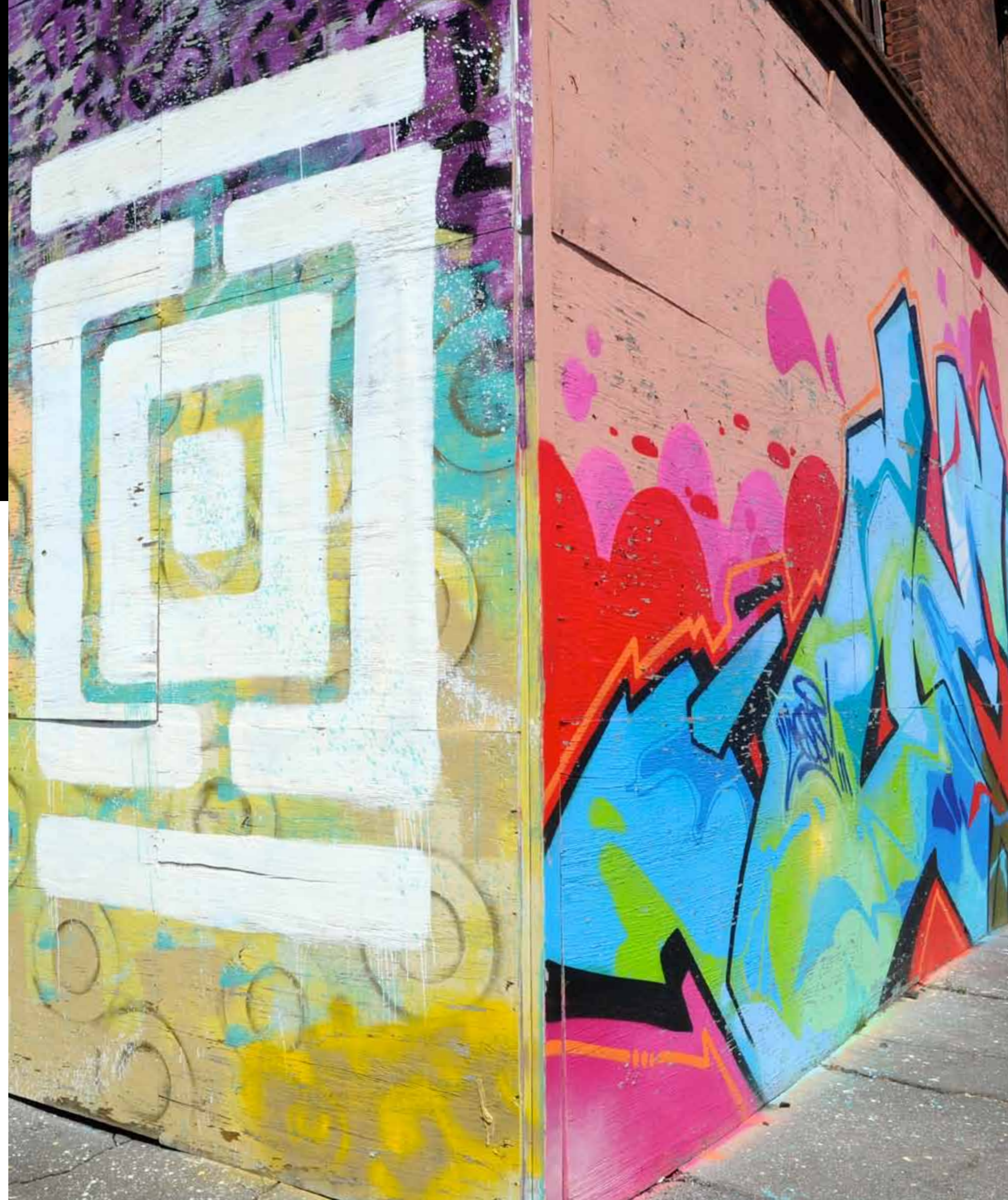
Bridgeport International (BELOW) A signature graffiti "b-boy" by German graffiti artist Can2 still adorns the wall of Bridgeport's Fame City—one of the many pieces left behind in Bridgeport from graffiti artists who've traveled the world leaving their marks.

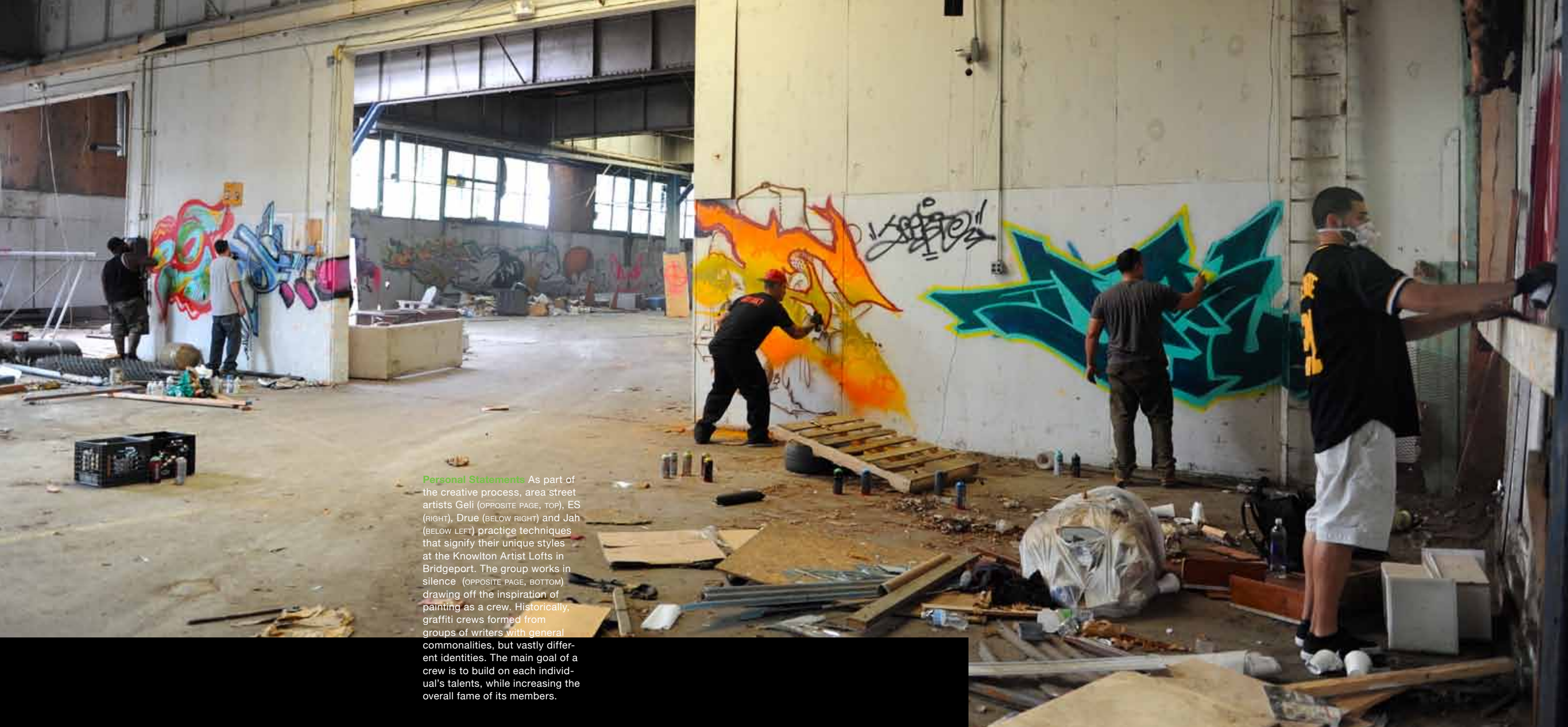
Art Evolution (OPPOSITE) The symbols on the small wall on the left remain from a piece Jahmane did two years ago that covered the entire (both small and large) wall. The large wall has work by Ces, Bus and Yes2. "We allowed them to paint over my piece for the last Bridgeport Arts Fest," notes Jahmane.



Terrible T-Kid, Ces, Bus, Yes2, and Tats Cru writers Bio, Nicer and Dmore at "piecing" sessions that established Bridgeport as a go-to stop on the graffiti atlas. In fact, ES was a guiding custodian of the now defunct, semi-secret location known as Fame City, home to more than a decade of local and international artists' murals. Remnants of a character from the German writer Can2 are still visible among the dilapidated layers of paint that reveal Fame City's significant past. Members of the Die crew often speculate on the great potential that revitalization of Fame City could mean for the City of Bridgeport and the arts community as a whole. They cite numerous examples of how a central, public, legal wall forum would actually curb illegal graffiti and allow up-and-coming talent to develop their skills in the company of "Kings."

Though the verdict is still out on what differentiates street art from graffiti, nuances in technique, subject matter and social politics are the only barriers that keep the two genres from melding into one creative entity. As the street-art craze rages on, so does the multi-million-dollar industry created in the wake of its popularity. New spray-paint companies like Montana, Ironlak and Belton have revolutionized the market; while a vast array of previously unobtainable "urban" art supplies are now readily accessible in stores. And more than any other period in time, graffiti artists are capitalizing on their craft with large-scale commissions, gallery shows and growing support from collectors who truly respect the culture.





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